**Fears for democracy in Tunisia where Arab Spring began**

Tunisians fear that divisions, particularly over the role of Islam, could destabilise the country’s transition to democracy and leave the economic problems that helped to spark the uprising unresolved



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**IN THE offices of one of Tunisia's many political parties, a poster captures the fear that keeps people returning to the streets. It shows a woman in the middle** of a protest. She holds up a simple sign: "The martyrs did not die for a new dictatorship."

Nine months after the revolt that swept away President Zine al- Abidine Ben Ali and sparked uprisings around the Arab world, Tunisians fear the changes they fought for may already be fading.

Most people in the country of 10- million are proud their revolution spread to the rest of the region, and are keen to set an example with democratic elections next month.

But many worry that Ben Ali loyalists continue to hold positions of power and are working behind the scenes to curtail real change.

They also fear that divisions, particularly over the role of Islam, could destabilise Tunisia’s transition to democracy and leave the economic problems that helped to spark the uprising unresolved.

It is similar in Egypt, where the military council that took control after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak has delayed elections. Some Egyptians worry that they have swapped one dictatorship for another.

In Libya, joy at the capture of Tripoli is still fresh, even if Muammar Gaddafi remains at large. But even so there is a sense of trepidation about what comes next.

At least Libyans have reason for hope. In Bahrain, protesters were cleared from the streets, hundreds were arrested, and promised reforms have gone nowhere. As violence continues in Syria and Yemen, there is a sense in Tunisia that the Arab Spring needs to prove it can do more than just topple leaders.

Closing the door on the hubbub of his campaign offices, veteran Tunisian political activist and head of the Congress for a Republic party, Moncef Marzouki, runs through the dangers.

"We are in a transitional phase," says the bespectacled doctor. "The problem is I am afraid this transitional phase will last a long time and will be harder than we expect.… People here think that a revolution is like pressing a button that brings you from the darkness into the light, but it is not that simple.… Will we create a new state, with a new president, with a new government, a parliament? There is still a question mark here and this is the difficulty of this phase, the lack of clarity."

Since Mr Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, Tunisian authorities have registered more than 100 parties. The 10 biggest — they range from Islamists to pro- market liberals to Communists — existed in various guises before the revolution. Only a handful of the smaller, newer parties have any hope of having an effect in elections; most are likely to merge or close down.

But to the disgust of many, two prominent officials from Mr Ben Ali’s now dissolved Constitutional Democratic Rally have set up their own parties and plan to stand, including former foreign minister Kemal Morjane. The Constitutional Democratic Rally claimed 2-million members before the revolution. Many of these joined the party to speed access to services or jobs, but some still have vested interests to protect or are tied by blood, marriage or birthplace to old regime figures.

"They are shameless and they should all be in prison … I hope that the Tunisian people will punish them in the coming elections and will give them zero," Dr Marzouki says.

"But they may play on money or regional loyalties and this could present a danger because the youth will not accept their return at all and if they win in the elections … we will have a new revolution."

Three opinion polls have found that more than half of Tunisian voters have yet to decide how they will cast their ballots. Support for former regime figures is, so far, too small to register in the statistics. Mr Ben Ali, politicians say, alienated people at every level of society, undermining his own support base over time.

But 25-year-old Sameh Tweiti, who took part in the protests, says he is worried that old regime figures, along with their corrupt cliques, might remain in power under the guise of new parties. The interim government has given the remnants of the old regime permission to set up political parties, says Mr Tweiti, protesting in central Tunis at a court decision to release a member of the former government. "It is the old regime in new clothes."